Ka ʻIke e Hoʻomaopopo Ai: A Journey toward Understanding Identity

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My first ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi class was at Kalāheo Adult Night School, six or seven years ago. I wanted to learn the language of my family—my grandmother and her siblings' first language, and their parents' tongue. I wanted to learn the Hawaiian language, not only as a way to pay respect and honor to my family heritage, but also as a personal commitment—a journey to embrace a part of me that had yet to be revealed.

I am an ethnic blend of hapa haole, Hawaiian, and Chinese, and I was raised in what I now recognize as a distinctively Hawaiian cultural value system.[1] Of course, I did not grow up thinking about the origins of the values I had been taught. I did not even consider my cultural identity, other than when I was asked: "What are you?" While I was raised to respond by including all of the ethnic groups to which I belong, today—because of the Hawaiian cultural values with which I was raised and having grown up in Hawaiʻi—I identify as Hawaiian.[2]

I attended school with a predominantly Asian heritage group of children. I really did not think about there being any appreciable differences among us. The only great difference that I could immediately perceive was that my friend next door had a furo—a Japanese-style bathing tub. My friends and I once tried to use it as a kind of Jacuzzi, but since it was too small for us to play in, we moved our childhood games back to the yard.

Another of my childhood memories involves spending time with my friend's grandfather. The elderly man's room was minimally furnished with only a bed and dresser; it was almost Zen-like and very functional. On his dresser were three medicinal bottles. I imagined they were filled with herbal tinctures and exotic remedies from unknown origins. My friend's grandfather was a knowledgeable man, and the other children and I would ask questions like, "How do you cure a headache?" In response, he would show us which areas of the body to rub and massage to ease the pain. When we sat at my friend's dinner table, I would look in wonder at their family's two traditional, handcrafted Japanese dolls, which were encased in glass and placed on a shelf. The bottles of

"curatives," the glass-encased dolls, and a katana sword as well, were all items I began to recognize as being culturally specific to my Japanese friends' family homes. It made my friends unique. It also gave them a shared sense of identity.

When I was in the third grade, I experienced my first racial slur, directed at me by a classmate. He was an angry Chinese kid, and I never played with him because he was a bully. One day, while the other children and I were seated quietly in a chapel-like room waiting for the lunch call, he whispered to me, "Haole shit." I had an older brother, so I knew what the last word meant, but "haole"? I was Hawaiian! I did not understand why he would be calling *me* a "haole." As we got older, the "bullyboy" grew into a muscled, quarterback type, working as a bouncer at a local nightclub. After seeing him one night, I decided to confront him. I said, "By the way, do you remember you called me . . ."—his body tilted back ever so slightly, his eyes flashed, and his facial expressions indicated a sense of recollection of his ugly behavior. As I watched him squirm in embarrassment, I wondered how many other people he had hurt over the course of his lifetime.

Having taught grade-school children, I believe the boy did not think of calling me a "haole shit" on his own. Rather, I am inclined to believe that children who make such racial slurs do so because they hear them from adults, family, and friends, or even other children. Racial prejudice is not innate; it is learned.

As I got older, I began spending more time with my hapa Hawaiian school friends. That we came from the same cultural background meant that we were comfortable in each other's company. There is a kind of camaraderie in finding sameness in a world of difference—a point that is exemplified when Hawaiian children ask their peers, "Wha chu stay? You Hawaiian?" and the response is an excited, "Ay, me too!"[3]

My mother relayed to me, "Your grandfather would say to your father—you are what you are, take the best of being Hawaiian and take what you need from the Western world and make the best out of it."[4] But what about being *hapa* Hawaiian? That was never a conversation I can remember having with my parents, simply because I did not grow up thinking about it. But somewhere along the line, the cultural "growing pains" hapa Hawaiian children experience become acute as the awareness increases that we are not simply Hawaiian, but *part* Hawaiian.

My siblings and I were blessed to have a mother who bestowed on us the value of being creative. The exploratory and imaginative aspects of these

activities seemed to always be in direct conflict with our father's desire to see us engage in the more "useful" skill-building activities that came from playing competitive sports. Not that there is anything wrong with competitive sports—by no means—but I wanted to communicate my thoughts and feelings through the visual arts as experienced in a fine art museum. Some of my first experiences with the creative arts were spent making lei with my Tūtū wahine, or learning the deeper intricacies of weaving with my Aunty. However, these family practices were soon set aside for more formal classroom instruction in photography, ceramics, and painting.

In my very early twenties, I left Hawaiʻi to live in the big city of San Francisco. This super-charged city was like an undulating wave attempting to transform a transplanted ʻopihi like me into a metropolitan pearl oyster.[5] The first difference I noticed was culinary in nature. The dishes in my new home all seemed to consist of white potatoes and lots of meat, like burgers and steaks. The difficulty for me was that I had grown up on a mostly fish diet (later to turn vegetarian through a post-pubescent global animal awareness and an abhorrence of twentieth-century mass farming methods). I missed my fish—dried fish especially—and I longed for poi. The dietary differences I encountered triggered in me a feeling of homesickness for Hawaiian food and a greater appreciation for my cultural roots.

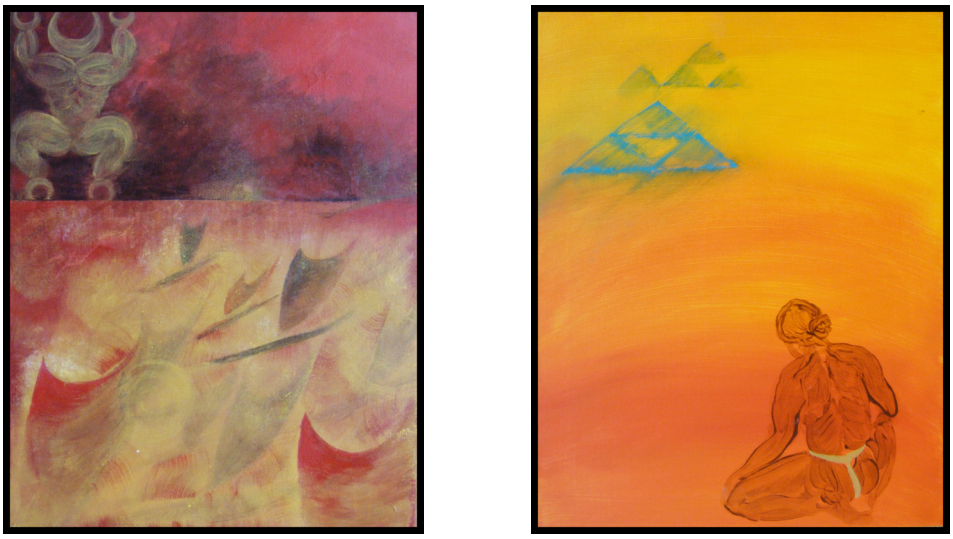
I was hired as a waitress at a Japanese–French restaurant, where I found sustenance through nightly meals of fresh seafood and rice. The perfectly steamed fish and rice was to me a heaven-sent gift after so many flaky and unappetizing 1-minute rice meals from Chinese restaurants. I viewed the food at the restaurant for which I worked as a version of Hawaiʻi-style food, and it helped me appreciate home as well as gain a sense of stability in the city.

But questions regarding my identity were constantly being asked. People would enquire, "What are you?" and "Please, do tell, what are your nationalities?" I initially answered that I was Hawaiian, Chinese, and Caucasian, but at times I would vary it with a more terse answer "American." With all the questioning and staring—because to many Californians I looked "just so unique"—I began to question my identity because it was such a regular topic of discussion with customers. My uncertainty over my identity was amplified when people asked, "Do you speak Hawaiian?" The first time I was asked if I spoke Hawaiian it took me by surprise. It had never occurred to me to learn Hawaiian—although when I was younger I had studied other languages: a little

Japanese in primary school, French in high school, and Italian in college. But Hawaiian? I began to feel ashamed whenever the question was posed, because the simple truth was I did not know the first thing about the language of my Hawaiian heritage. I felt like an alien to my own culture.[6] I could not even understand why I had never noticed this deficit before in my life. Why did it take so many years and my moving thousands of miles across the ocean to realize that something was missing? It is true: Sometimes it takes living in new places to recognize what is truly important in our lives and the journey we need to be on in order to return home.

While my personal exploration toward understanding my identity has brought me full circle—back to my ʻohana—by no means does it mean a rejection of my other ethnic connections. Nor does my embracing of ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi imply a denial of the English language. Most of my ancestors over the last 100 years—from Norway to Hawaiʻi—spoke English, and it is my first language. However, learning the language of my kūpuna has made me feel more complete; my life has been forever enriched and my foundation strengthened.

Palena ʻole kuʻu aloha a me ka mahalo i ke Akua Mana Loa, kuʻu mau kūpuna, kuʻu mau mākua, a me nā hoaloha a pau i ko lākou mālama ʻana mai iaʻu. Kū ka piko, kahe ke koko, kū i ka hā.[7]



FIGURES 1 and 2. *ʻIke e Hoʻomaopopo Ai*, by Makanani Parker. 2 of 4. Acrylic on canvas, 2008, 50 cm x 40 cm (each image).

Two stories are relayed in this article, one written and the other painted (figures 1 and 2).[8] Both speak about origins, movements across distance, the beauty of growth, and the remembrance of where we come from. For me, learning ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi has provided an important key to understanding who I am. Without our indigenous tongue we lose our sense of being, our sense of personal and collective identity, and our moʻolelo. In a report on the social andeconomic conditions of Native Hawaiians, Larry L Kimura underscored the link between language and identity: "Language demonstrates the uniqueness of a people" and is "inextricably tied to the definition and identity of the Hawaiian people" (1983, 173). Conversely, renowned Māori filmmaker Merata Mita noted the outcome of not knowing one's Native language: "If to choose a language is to choose a world, then being denied a language is being denied a world" (1989, 310). With those resounding words, I state my position: I have chosen to not be denied.

Glossary
ʻāina: land
haole: refers to someone who is white, but "formerly, any foreigner; foreign, introduced, of foreign origin, as plants, pigs, chickens" (Pukui and Elbert 1971, 58).
hapa: part or fraction of
kūpuna: ancestors
lei: floral garland
moʻolelo: stories, histories
ʻohana: family
ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi: Hawaiian language
ʻopihi: a type of limpet of the *Cellana* species
poi: a Hawaiian staple food made from the pounded root of the taro plant
pono: justness; balance
Tūtū wahine: grandmother

Notes
1. I choose this particular ordering of ethnicities because it identifies "haole" as the ethnicity others perceive me as being
2. The use of a blood quantum rationale in Hawaiʻi to define what constitutes being Hawaiian has been a prominent topic for discussion, particularly since its introduction to the Hawaiian Home Lands Act during Hawaiʻi's status as a US Territory. Under the act, one must have a 50 percent Hawaiian blood quantum to be considered Native Hawaiian. This stipulation has become a critical basis for deciding who is eligible to have access to ʻāina and other benefits. Today, the blood quantum rationale remains a pernicious means by which to determine

Hawaiian identity and can only be changed through legislative and congressional measures.
3. In this scene—though we were not speaking Hawaiian—the language we used, Pidgin-English, enabled us to communicate and share our understanding of our uniqueness and our belonging to Hawai'i. Until the resurgence of the language in the 1970s, many Hawaiians could not speak 'ōlelo Hawai'i, in large part due to its banning in 1898. For more on the banning of the Hawaiian language and its effect on Native Hawaiians, see Kimura 1983.
4. Conversation with Sharon L Parker, Kailua, 1 November 2008.
5.'Opihi is a limpet. Colloquially, in Hawai'i, referring to someone as an 'opihi means he or she is very close to another person, like a child to its mother. It can also connote one person's neediness for another.
6. Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has discussed the sense of alienation colonized peoples often feel in relation to their cultural heritage: "Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home in the community" (1986, 28).
7. This passage in 'ōlelo Hawai'i translates as, "My love and gratitude is unlimited to God, my ancestors, and my parents and all close friends for their guidance. Honor the source, perpetuate the genealogy, preserve the breath." I would like to thank kumu hula Noelani Tachera in particular for introducing me to the last phrase in this passage. Sam No'eau Warner has asserted, "The Hawaiian language should be perpetuated because it is part of Hawaiian Heritage—what can help to make Hawaiians whole again as a people. Hawaiians need to learn and know their language, culture, stories, histories, and religion because they interrelate and are integrally linked to one another and to the people. Language—the words people use to describe the environment, thought, emotions—as an expression of world view—is a medium through which people transmit culture and history" (1997, 77). I use 'ōlelo Hawai'i here to denote the decision I have made to reengage with my Hawaiian heritage.
8. The two images were painted for and titled after this article, and convey ideas about origins, migrations, and genealogy. They provide a glimpse of what can be realized through recollecting our past and seeking a pono future.

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